Title:A Study of Theatres and Performances in Birbhum, 1970-2016

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Synopsis

The identity and popularity of Bengali theatre always restrict to the theatres and performances in the cities especially those that are performed in and around Calcutta (now Kolkata) since the early nineteenth century. Sudipto Chatterjee in his essay looked at the history of nineteenth-century Bengali theatre to analyse the colonial native's construction of 'selfhood' through the notion of 'nation'. In spite of being intent on having a national identity of theatre the educated intelligentsia of Calcutta engaged simultaneously in an emulation of the 'other' as well as a proclamation of the 'selfhood' (Chatterjee, 99). Chatterjee envisages how the national self thus emerged by submerging its own identity as an inevitable outcome of colonial hybridity that appealed to the taste of a wide variety of castes classes of people, presented in the regions of Bengal. The impact of this colonial mimicry reached in its extreme level during the nineteenth century when the local *zaminders* in the small towns and villages of the *mufossil* districts, started patronizing amateur or *sakher* theatre on the basis of European proscenium practices of Calcutta, completely disregarding the tradition of Bengali traditional *natya* or *lokonatya* (folk theatre) performances. Although amidst this dominant practice of Bengal theatre, many playwrights and playmakers attempted to connect to the masses of the interior rural areas, taking resort to the traditional or folk theatre practices that remain always popular among the Bengali masses. Thus being dominated, marginalized, decadent, and long discarded by the mainstream theatre of Calcutta and its suburbs, the group theatres of Bengal *mufossil* districts have taken a long time to recover and gradually have developed an indigenous circuit out of the hegemony of Calcutta theatres. The urge of this research is to probe into the development of the theatres and performances in Birbhum district during the selected time span (1970-2016) both in form and content to trace their endeavour to modernize as well as to restore the indigenous theatre practices of rural Bengal.

Research objectives will be to probe on the issues like firstly, what was the cultural and aesthetic politics behind the impulse of incorporating folk elements in theatre and non-proscenium practices of experimental theatres in 1970s Bengal? Why did they seek the village audience and what impact did it have on the theatres of Birbhum? Secondly, how did the impact of contemporary socio-political issues, urban-rural cross-pollination, and alternative living theatre influence the changing languageof the theatres of Birbhum, and how far was this similar or different to the theatres of other areas of Bengal? Thirdly, how far have they managed to highlight the regional folklore in their productions? At the same time this research also wishes to interrogate whether this ambivalent process of third theatre, or an alternative living theatre, sometimes loosely brought under the umbrella of 'Roots Movement', is quintessentially 'anti-modern', or whether it is actually an attempt to evolve a discourse of an 'alternative modernity'

by subverting some of the paradigms of its European counterpart performed by the Calcutta theatres which are actually a by-product of both capitalism and imperialism in the West. In this study, my burden will be to locate the ground for engendering a nuanced identity of the theatres of Birbhum in Bengal.

The study will be mainly an ethnographic research; emphasis will be laid on both qualitative and quantitative assessments. I insist on fieldwork and case study as essential tools of my overall research approach. I shall visit Kolkata and Birbhum (especially Suri, Hetampur, Ahmedpur, Labpur, Rampurhat, Sainthia, Illumbazar, Bolpur, Dubrajpur) where the theatre groups that initiated their journey since the 1970s, are still surviving along with their recent stage performances. In case of research skills, the project will be multidimensional and as for strengthening the theoretical framework, I prefer theories of postcolonialism. The decolonizing attempt of post-Independence Indian theatre, what came to be identified as *The Theatre of the Roots* exemplified an ambivalence, similar kind of ambivalence I will seek to find in the theatres of Birbhum. With a post-colonial approach, the study will also survey the theoretical and programmatic discussion on syncretic and indigenous theatre to inspect on the attempt of the theatres of Birbhum to decolonize the stage. Postcolonial theory revolves around the notion that ". . . many of the wrongs, if not crimes, against humanity are a product of the economic dominance of the north over the south" (Young 6). This economic dominance was in the form of capitalist economy introduced in the colonised lands by the coloniser which caused serious damages there. This is the reason why the role of Marxism or communism will be very important for me in the analysis of colonial domination and anti-colonial resistance because it condemns capitalism and is the fundamental framework of postcolonial thinking.

In the first chapter, my focus will be on identifying the socio-cultural history of Birbhum and its ritual Performances.Then I will move on to reveal the parallel running of theatrical *jatra* and amateur theatre practices in Birbhum before the 1970s. On the other hand, in brief, I will also discuss here on the experimentations of Tagore who were in quest of a new language of Theatre at Santiniketan (a distinguished place of this district). The second chapterwill locate the trajectory of IPTA and New Theatre movements in Bengal that led to the emergence of many group theatres in Birbhum since the 1970s with their move towards leftist linings when the entire district was agitated due to the Naxalite movement. Again I will inspect here the performances of Tagore's plays and his style of playmaking by Visva-Bharati and theatre groups of Santiniketan (like *Sahityika,* formed by Tagore himself) and their communication or lack of communication with the group theatres of Birbhum. In the third chapter, I will deal with the experimentations by the group theatres of Birbhum in both proscenium and non-proscenium theatre since 1980 with the influence of third theatre and street theatre up to the year 2000. The chapter will further illustrate the popularity of TV and films in the 1990s and its effect on the theatres and performances of Birbhum. In the fourth chapter, I will explore the contemporary elements in the Post-2000 theatres of Birbhum along with recurrent urban folk productions to cope up with the theatre practices of the state as well as the country. Moreover, issues like the development of alternative Spaces and productions (*urban folk/folk urban*), mutual Interaction between the Kolkata Theatres and Theatres of Birbhum, rural-urban cross-pollination, theatre-academia interfacewill be taken over here.

In spite of the lack of support from the IPTA branches compare to the other districts, group theatres of Birbhum stirred a revolutionary zeal among people both in urban and rural

areas of Bengal, with powerful political prospects, although they were against the shouting for any particular party through their theatres. In his essay "Adhunik Bangla Natyasahitya" (*Modern Bengali Drama and Literature*), Tarashankar claims that with the expansion of the prospects of our life, varieties are naturally increasing and we should collect raw materials of drama from these varieties. Again he comments that he is against the conventional tradition of endowing the stage with the materials of western, he can find no art, literature, self-respect and social awareness in this. Then further elaborating upon the limitations of European realist mode Tagore indicts: "The theatres that we have set up in imitation of the West are too elaborate to be brought to the doors of all and sundry. In them, the creative richness of the poet and player are overshadowed by the wealth of the capitalist [...]". On the basis of these observations of two eminent literary figure of Birbhum and the above-mentioned arguments, I shall conclude that the playwrights and playmakers in Birbhum have tackled all problems and their groups are surviving even after the end of the twentieth century due to their powerful prospects of creating a resistance against dominant western tradition of Calcutta theatres in Bengal by creating distinct theatrical spaces.

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